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AUTHOR Collins, James L.; Moran, Charles
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ABSTRACT

At Springfield Technical High School (Massachusetts) tenth grade students are required to spend three six-week periods in writing laboratory classes. As the students write, the teacher moves from student to student for short conferences, checking with each student twice during each class period. Students proceed in a three-step process and are required to check with the teacher at regular intervals. The first step is to choose a subject and make a list of topics on that subject, the second step is to organize the list, and the third step is to produce a first draft of a paper from the list. Student papers are kept in a folder and a sequence of writing assignments is followed by all students. The laboratory teacher also has procedures to follow. The teacher cannot spend more than a minute with a particular writer, but must read the writer's work rapidly, say something, and move on--somewhat like a shop or art teacher. Teachers follow a response pattern in which they (1) look at content to be sure it is concrete and specific, (2) check form and organization, (3) work with the writing of sentences, and (4) pay attention to individual words such as spelling and diction. Student response to the program has been exceptionally positive. (MKM)

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James L. Collins
Department of Instruction
State University of New York at Buffalo
553 Baldy Hall
Buffalo, NY . 14260

Charles Moran
Department of English
Bartlett Hall
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003

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Charles Moran

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# The Writing Laboratory: A Report from the Field

We are in room 212, Springfield Technical High School, in Springfield, Massachusetts, waiting for English class to begin. Some students wander in, alone or in groups; others linger just outside the door. A bell rings. Students pick up manila folders from the desk at the front of each row, go to their seats, and open their folders. Within a few minutes, all twenty-seven students have begun to write, and the classroom is quiet. The teacher moves among the writers, talking to each for thirty seconds or so and then moving on. The teacher will continue to circulate among the students and will see each of them twice during the period. Students write in a business-like fashion. There is occasional light horseplay, perhaps a necessary relief from the steady writing. As the spirit moves them students read each other's papers. They talk unobtrusively, almost always about what they have in common: their work. Shortly before the end of the period, there is a shuffling of papers as the students put their day's work into their folders. The bell rings, and the students place their folders on the front-row desks as they leave. Tomorrow they will return, to begin where they ended today.

This class is not unusual; in fact, it is the normal tenth grade English class at Springfield Technical High School. In the fall of 1974 the English Department at Tech decided to experiment with the writing laboratory in its tenth grade English classes. In its more-or-less conventional

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English curriculum, too many students were not learning to write, and something clearly had to be done. The Tech English Department became interested in the laboratory method of teaching writing as it has been described by Donald Murray, Roger Garrison, and others.[1] They introduced three six-week writing laboratories into the tenth grade English curriculum, making it certain that students would spend half of their year's English class time with pen or pencil in hand, writing and rewriting with a teacher's editorial assistance. In this new tenth grade English curriculum each student writes for forty-three minute periods each week for eighteen weeks--something like sixty-three hours of writing time. During this period the teacher sees the student's writing twice each day, five times each week, for eighteen weeks--or one hundred eighty brief editorial conferences during the school year.

The evaluation of this experiment has to date been somewhat casual, but all the instruments agree: the writing laboratory does what it sets out to do, and it will remain in the Tech English curriculum. Students are enthusiastic, for, as many of them have said, they feel for the first time they are learning something about writing. When the teacher becomes a helpful editor instead of a critical reader of a finished product, students become relatively eager writers who take some pride in revising and polishing their own work. And when the teacher takes them seriously as writers, students begin to think of themselves as writers. The teachers at Tech like the writing laboratory better each semester, as they become

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[1] Donald Murray, A Writer Teaches Writing (Boston, 1968);

Roger Garrison, "An Approach to Tutorial Instruction in Freshman Composition," Westbrook College, Portland, Maine (unpublished monograph).

more proficient editors. Morale in the English Department is high, partly because teachers are seeing their students become better writers--a new and heartening sight. From the teachers' perspective, the writing laboratory is a format in which they can teach writing with some degree of success.

But enough of this purple, or at least pink, prose. How well does the writing laboratory actually operate? What is learned, and how? Our subject is Theresa B., a student selected at random from a summer school tenth grade writing class. In the early stages of the summer session we began to follow our work with Theresa, briefly noting what the teacher-editor said to her and when he said what he said. We did not pay more attention to Theresa than to the other students in the class. She received no special treatment of any kind and was not aware that we were following her progress in anything other than the normal manner. The class was a tenth grade writing laboratory that met for 100 minutes five days a week for six weeks.

We find Theresa now in the third week of the summer session, writing slowly and deliberately. On 7/22 she wrote the following essay in response to the assignment, "Describe your neighborhood."

First Draft

My neighborhood is nice. People take good care of their property. Their always out mowing the lawn, trimming the trees and hedges. A couple of houses are run down. They need fixing up, painting, and the yards need to clean up.

The street is farely new. It was just tarred over about six months ago. Sidewalks need fixing there all cracks and holes.

Kids play baseball in the street. Some ride their bikes. and other go swimming. Little children play their own games. And swim in their little pools.

There are a few people in the neighborhood who are nice to talk with. The people next door to us are nice. They have a little two year old named Michele. I babysit her alot. They are always there when we need help and we are always there when they need help.

My house is at the corner. Its surrounded by trees and bushes. Its made of brick and the color of it is red and gray.

The writer showed us this first draft. We underlined the word their in line two and asked the writer the following questions, rapidly and without waiting for a response: "Who is always out mowing the lawn? Where are they, relative to your house? When do they mow? What time of day? What days? Weekends? What kinds of mowers? Gas mowers? Riding mowers? Hand mowers? What kinds of noise do they make? And when do they make noise?" We told Theresa to rewrite paragraph one, keeping sentences one and two and beginning at sentences three to answer some of the questions we had asked about the mowing. Our comments took less than one minute. Theresa began to work, and in fifteen minutes produced this paragraph:

Second Draft

My neighborhood is nice. People take good care of their property. The people next door and across the street use a gas mower, they mow their lawns in the morning about eleven o'clock and 12:00. The girl next door Carol trims the hedges and trees

around her house and Walter next door trims his. A couple of houses are run down. They need fixing up, painting and yards cleaned up.

We drew a slash mark between his and A couple, line 5, underlined people, line 2. We asked Theresa to tell us more about the people. We asked her to rewrite the paragraph, leaving sentences one and two as is, telling us about family #1 (people next door) in sentences 3 and 4 and about family #2 (people across the street) in sentences 5 and 6. We said we were confused about Carol and Walter. Again, our comments took less than one minute. Theresa produced the following revision:

Third Draft

My neighborhood is nice. People take good care of their property. The people next door Carol and her husband Armand about eleven o'clock in the morning they go out and clean up the yard. He is twenty-eight and she is twenty-seven. Armand mows the lawn. He uses a gas mower. Carol trims the trees and hedges, and takes care of the flower garden. The man across the street from me is about fifty tow. His name is Walter. He goes out once a week in the morning and mows the lawn with a hand mower sometimes and other times gas mower. About noon he goes out and works in the yard, trimming trees and sweeping the sidewalk.

We told Theresa that we were delighted with what she had written, which was true. We asked her now to write a paragraph expanding the last two sentences of paragraph #1, draft #1. We said, "Theresa run-down

houses--where are they, relative to your house? In what way are they run down? Yards? Front yard? Back yard? House itself, Who lives in these houses?" We wrote these questions on the bottom of Draft #3 in pencil. Again, our comments took less than one minute. The writer began the paragraph and wrote until the period ended.

At the beginning of class on the next day, we told Theresa that we knew she was working on a "run-down houses" paragraph and that we liked her first paragraph. She wrote diligently, and we did not get to her for some time. When we did, we found that she had completed not one but five paragraphs. Here is her "run-down houses" paragraph:

Third Draft, Paragraph 2

> The house down the street from me is run down. An old lady in her eighty's lives there. Her name is Judy. Her house is in real bad shape the paint is chipping off in big pieces. The grass is waist high and there is trash all over the yard. The roof is falling apart and the door is falling off the hinges.
>
> The other house about five houses down from Judy's is an old house. An old couple live in it. The house needs painting. The gate is falling apart in pieces. There is broken pieces of cars, wheels, fenders, trash, and wood in the yard. The windows are broken, and the roof has a hole in it.

Theresa had also produced the following paragraphs, a development of materials in the first draft. We had not asked her to do these.

Paragraphs 3, 4.

The kids around the neighborhood gather and play baseball or street hockey. Bobby and his friend Kenny are the oldest they are eight. The other are from five, six, and seven. The two oldest start the games off they make the rules. Some kids don't play baseball or street hockey they would rather ride there bikes around the neighborhood. A few have pools in their yards so they invite there friends go swimming. The little kids play their games of dolls and trucks, and go swimming in their little pools.

The people next door moved in last summer. They have become good friends of me and my family. I babysit their little two year old daughter Michele. When ever they need help with anything we are always there. And if we need help they are there. I go over almost every day and talk with Carol and help her out with some housework until the new baby comes in a few days. Once in a while they come over and visit awhile.

And Theresa had produced a paragraph on the streets and sidewalks of her neighborhood, again an expansion of materials in her first draft. Theresa went on to produce a 500-word final draft that has its rough spots but is still a three-fold expansion of the materials latent in her first draft. Her final draft is longer and better than her first draft. It is infinitely more interesting. What excites us is that the writer has begun to edit her own work. After we led her through the development of paragraphs one and two, she independently returned to her first

draft, selected three more subjects (games, neighbors, streets) and developed each into a paragraph. She had learned two skills: how to discover undeveloped material in her first draft; and how to develop this material into paragraphs. Furthermore, she applied what she had learned in writing the "neighborhood" essay to subsequent writing assignments.

From our experiences with hundreds of students like Theresa, we are convinced that students do become better writers in the writing laboratory. Theresa, and all of us, learn to write by writing, getting editorial advice, rewriting, getting more editorial advice, rewriting, and so on. The exchanges between writer and editor must be frequent to be effective, especially with writers who are not confident, and in the writing laboratory the exchanges are frequent: Theresa went through two brief editorial conferences and three revisions of a paragraph in something like fifty minutes.

This process could not take place in the normal English classroom. In the classes we used to teach, Theresa would have written her first draft, submitted it, received a grade and a written comment, and that would have been that. She might have read the comment and applied it to her next writing assignment, but we doubt it. Theresa's improvement is not unusual in a writing laboratory; it is normal. We could have selected more dramatic examples, but we have tried to be fair to our materials. What Theresa has learned she learned in slightly more than three hours of class time. During this time, other students in the same room were learning other aspects of the writer's craft, as they worked at their own subjects in their own way.

In the Tech writing laboratories the classroom teacher sees all the writing done by all of his students. We have found it possible for a teacher to keep up with as many as thirty student writers, but only if the teacher follows certain procedures, which we will describe as fully as we can. To begin with, the laboratory teacher cannot spend more than a minute with a particular writer. The teacher has to read the writer's work rapidly, say something, and move on, somewhat like a wood shop teacher, or an art teacher in a studio with thirty student painters. This is clearly a new reading situation for all of us: no easy chair, no solitude. In this new situation the teacher simply has to read the student's writing and diagnose the writing's most important problem in a very short time.

In the Tech writing laboratories we follow a diagnostic process that allows us to work fast. Instead of responding to all the problems that may exist in the piece of writing before us, we respond to sets of problems, but one set at a time. First, we look at the content, and while looking at content we do <u>not</u> look at structural problems, sentence-level problems, or spelling and diction. Before dealing with any of these other sets of problems, the student writing must be sufficiently concrete and specific. It must, in short, be about something. If the writing is about something, then we move on. If it is not, then we stop here until we are satisfied that there is sufficient content.

Once there is content, there can be form, and we move on to problems related to form, asking ourselves the question, "Is the essay appropriately organized?" If not, then we deal with problems related to form. Once these have been dealt with by the writer, then we move to the third stage, problems

that have to do with the writing of sentences. Run-on sentences, fragments, parallel structure--these are addressed now. When the sentences have been improved, then on to the final step: attention to individual words.

In the writing laboratory, we have found it essential that we read in this way: first for content, then for form, then for sentence-level problems, and finally for spelling and diction. If we alter the sequence and begin with spelling or with the run-on sentence, our writers tend to resist. Once the content and form have been established, however, once the essence of the piece is on paper, then our writers are usually motivated to polish what is now clearly to them and to us a rough diamond.

The diagnostic process we have outlined makes it possible for us to limit our contact time to one minute or less, but this process by itself it not enough to order the chaos sufficiently. So we ask our students writers to proceed in a three-step process, and we require them to check with the teacher before moving on from one step to another. These requirements bring the teacher to the writing at regular intervals, and they make the editorial work somewhat systematic and predictable.

The first step for the writer is to choose a subject and make a list. If the essay is descriptive, the list will be composed of details; if the essay is to be polemic, the list will be composed of arguments and/or bits of evidence. Jimmy D.'s essay, "The View from My Fourth Floor Porch," began with a list of things that could be seen from that vantage point:

1. the ground
2. the garbage
3. the school
4. the old house
5. fights

At this stage the teacher intervened because the list was not specific enough. He asked Jimmy "What can you tell us about the old house? How does the ground look from your vantage point? Where is the garbage? What else do you see?" Writers are kept at the list until the list is full.

The writer's second step is to organize the list: to decide what materials to keep and what to leave out; to decide where to begin and where to end; and to decide how to get from the beginning to the end. Returning to Jimmy D.'s essay, should the old house be a full paragraph? Should the description of the garbage be included in the description of the street? Where to begin? End? The teacher looks at Jimmy's list for a plan, not necessarily an outline, but evidence that some arrangement of details has taken place.

The writer's third step is to produce a first draft, working from the organized list. The draft writing usually proceeds smoothly, with little help from the teacher. We have found, in fact, that the writer will often, and perhaps properly, resist the teacher's intervention at this stage. Once the first draft has been written, the teacher reads it for content, form, and correctness, as described above. Our work with our student writers most often takes the form of questions. "Does the paragraph about the car accident belong at the end of the essay?" "Should that paragraph, in fact, be part of your essay describing the view from the fourth floor porch?" "Could you develop your description of the men drinking beer and give them a paragraph all their own?" The teacher addresses one problem at a time, and the writer works on that single problem. When problems of content and form have been dealt with, then it is time to polish sentences and pay attention to individual words. Again the teacher reads for one problem at a time, and the student eliminates that problem as he revises. When the writing is as good as it

can be, on to the next assignment. The process begins again.

Once the teacher has learned to read and the student to write in the manner we have just outlined, it becomes possible for a single teacher to edit the writing of thirty students. This year, eighteen sections of English 10 are presently functioning smoothly and well at Springfield Technical High School. But the first few class meetings may be difficult, as both students and teachers find themselves learning new modes of behavior in the English classroom. The students will have to learn to sit quietly and write for forty minutes. They will learn, but not on the first day of class, or perhaps even on the second or third. It has been our experience that if the teacher simply expects students to write and does not alter these expectations, even the most reluctant students will finally begin to write. The teacher, too, may find it difficult to adjust. In the conventional English classroom, the teacher is at least some of the time the center of attention. In the writing laboratory, the teacher is never the center of attention. We have found ourselves strongly tempted, especially in the first few classes, to move to the center of the stage and address the class as a whole. If the laboratory is to flourish, the teacher must resist this temptation. At Tech, we have found that teachers and students have adjusted by the end of the second week. We suggest, therefore, that the laboratory be given at least a four-week trial period before it is evaluated.

Even after the writing laboratory is well under way, it is a delicate organism, one that is particularly vulnerable to certain kinds of distraction. If the teacher talks to individual writers in a loud voice, for instance, then the teacher becomes a model of a talking person and this behavior will almost certainly be reproduced by some of the students. There is a feedback

circuit in the writing laboratory: noise produces more noise; businesslike attention to writing produces more businesslike attention to writing. We have found that discipline problems ought to be handled privately, outside of, or after class. Students should sit as far apart as the facilities allow, so the unavoidable noise of the editing process will cause as little disturbance as possible.

Finally, we have found two procedures helpful in our writing classes. First, each student has a folder which contains all of his or her writing: lists, scratch-work, drafts, finished essays. This folder never leaves the classroom. All the papers belonging to a finished essay are stapled together by the teacher, both to signal that the essay has been completed and to organize the student's work for eventual grading. Second, we have a sequence of assignments ready before the laboratory begins. Students will progress through this sequence at their own speed, but they will all be following the same sequence. The assignments are general in their wording, move from less to more difficult, and allow for writing skills to accumulate, to build on each other, to be used again and again. One sequence of assignments that has worked well for us is this:

1. Describe an object.
2. Describe a place.
3. Describe a person.
4. Tell us about something that happened to you.
5. Tell us about something you saw happen.
6. Describe your neighborhood.

This series moves from the description of a single object to the description of many objects (place); then to description of the physical and metaphysical (person); then to description as it occurs in narrative; and finally to the "neighborhood" essay that can be a combination of various sorts of description and narration. Although the assignments in this series are inflexible in their

progression, in practice we find ourselves bending a good deal. Assignments start a student thinking about a topic. They are perhaps most useful as starting points. If the writer conforms to the teacher's master plan and writes well, that's fine; if the writer does not follow the plan and writes well, that's fine too.

The writing laboratory has proved itself at Springfield Technical High School, and word of its success has produced interest in other Massachusetts schools and colleges. Our summer classes were observed by teachers and administrators from local school systems, and their impressions have led to the adoption of writing laboratories in one local junior high school and one local senior high school. The writing laboratory is presently being used not only in area schools but at a Springfield community college and at the Amherst campus of the University of Massachusetts.

The laboratory format does not solve all problems indigenous to our profession; far from it. The writing laboratory does not teach, among other things, the interpretation of literature or discussion skills. It simply does what it sets out to do: improves a student's ability to edit and improve his own writing; and it makes students feel that in teaching writing as we do, we are teaching everything else as well--logic, rhetoric, modes of discourse, how to think. But we have told our students to avoid the apocalyptic in concluding paragraphs, and we must follow our own advice. To preserve ourselves from our own enthusiasm, we will conclude with Theresa B.'s evaluation of our work:

> "This summer I learned to write more words into paragraphs, more details, and to express more thoughts. I learned it by rewriting papers, putting more thoughts down on paper, and by correcting all my mistakes."